Dennis Montagna

The Early Passing of an Architectural Landmark

Atlantic Service Station, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, 1964. Photograph courtesy of The Philadelphia Inquirer.

This is an obituary for a one-of-a-kind service station that died young, succumbing in the 30th year of its age. Designed in 1964 by architect Vincent Kling for the Atlantic Richfield Company, the station was a well-known landmark at the corner of U.S. Route 1 and State Road 23 in Bala Cynwyd, Lower Merion Township, just outside Philadelphia. It was distinguished by its triangular plan and its tall, pressed aluminum roof formed by diamond-shaped baked enamel tiles.

The design was well-suited to the station's corner location. The building's triangular plan facilitated access by cars pulling in and out of the pump area and service bays, and the glass-enclosed central office allowed for a commanding view on the part of service station attendants who, you may recall, still pumped gasoline for motorists in the 1960s.

On the eve of the destruction of the service station in 1993, Kling, now 80, discussed the station's creation in 1964. Atlantic Richfield's corporate offices were then located in Philadelphia and the company had commissioned Kling to design a prototype for a new generation of service stations. But by the time the building was completed, the company had retreated from this plan. Whether it was the unorthodox nature of the design or the construction costs associated with it, those of the roof in particular, the plan never became a standard Atlantic design. Kling talked about the philosophical basis for this station's design, "Instead of a great big sign saying, 'I'm here to peddle gas,' you have a building with some aesthetic posture. You have a big roof with tiles instead of a big sign with neon lights. Let the architecture say, 'I'm here to pump gas.' It's an educated way to do a plebeian thing."

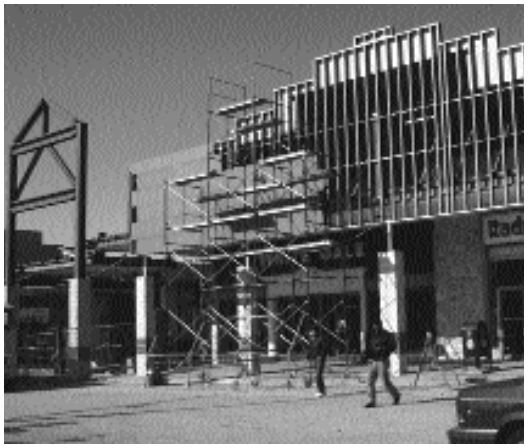
Atlantic A-Plus Mini Market (formerly the Atlantic Service Station), Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania. Photo by the author, 1993.

But the station's unique form made it resistant to the shift away from automotive service and toward convenience store functions that has developed since the 1970s. The Atlantic Station's service bays were enclosed and much of its glazing gave way to solid walls that allowed non-automotive merchandise to fill the triangular space. The station became one of Atlantic's A-Plus Mini-Markets in 1988, but it never fit a corporate ideal that retailers' derive as much revenue from food and convenience items as from gasoline sales. When the Sun Company [Sunoco] acquired the station in the early 1990s, it decided to replace the building. Explaining why the station had been slated for demolition, Sun Company spokesperson Paul Durkin said, "It's certainly an interesting design, but it's not very functional for its use...If you go into any A-Plus food store you can see there is a logical process to everything, the way traffic flows. That station is now a make-shift jury-rigged [sic] food market."

Kling agreed that the building was not well suited to its new use, "It was not designed as a food store. It was designed as a quick-service gasoline sales center, with a neighborly relation to what is around it, instead of the commercial junky look of most stations."

But neighborliness held little attraction for its new owners. Durkin expressed the Sun Company's view, "If you go into one [A-Plus] in Pennsylvania it should look just like one in New York. We don't want 15 differently designed buildings so people will be confused."

Attempts by local preservationists to dissuade the Sun Company from carrying out its decision to demolish the station proved futile. Architect Robert DeSilets, chairman of Lower Merion Township's Historical Architecture Review Board, led a two-year effort to convince the station's new owners that they had acquired a building that, while not ideally suited to the company's highly regimented system of quick shopping, was significant and worth preserving. Such arguments carried little weight in the face of a clear corporate mission that saw building standardization as a must.



Bala Cynwyd Shopping Center, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, built ca. 1960, receiving a new Dryvit facade. Photo by Rebecca Shiffer, 1991.

So, the old Atlantic station is gone, replaced within days by one considerably less radical—a standard, pre-fabricated rectangular convenience store fronted by a massive free-standing canopy towering above four banks of gas pumps. While customers might be bored by the generic new station, the Sun Company can rest assured that they certainly won't be confused by it.

Beyond the loss of a one-of-a-kind service station, this demolition serves as a case study that speaks to the challenges of preserving resources of the modern era. This building was the victim of both a lack of broad popular interest in modernist buildings, as well as specific changes in the nature of contemporary gas stations. Buildings of this type and age are especially at risk and are likely to become more so.

Lower Merion Township includes a broad spectrum of architectural resources from a highly-prized late-17th century Welsh Quaker meeting house to the Main Line suburban homes of Philadelphia's 19th-century industrialists. But it also includes a significant concentration of mid-20th-century commercial and residential buildings that formed a context for Kling's Atlantic station. This context includes studios for local television stations, 1950s shopping centers, moderate scale office buildings, high-rise apartment buildings and other examples of the decentralized, thoroughfare-centered development that blossomed during the post-war era. But architectural resources of this period are only beginning to garner popular and professional interest. In the meantime, these buildings are being demolished or remodeled within an inch of their lives so that they might better compete with new buildings in the search for tenants. Countless 1950s and '60s buildings, well-designed and constructed with good materials, have been buried beneath ponderous Post Modern facades, usually rendered in cheap, short-lived materials like Dryvit. This tide will likely not be stemmed until the public grows to value these buildings, leading building owners perceive their marketability. For a significant number of buildings of the modern era to survive the vicissitudes of commerce, they must first acquire a level of popular esteem similar to that enjoyed by late-19th-century buildings since the mid-1970s, buildings that in previous years had been widely disdained and seldom the focus of preservation efforts.

But recent buildings must also be adaptable to new uses if a changing world has rendered them obsolete. Gas stations serve as good case studies. They represent the product distribution point for a business that has undergone critical shifts that will likely place at risk both idiosyncratic gas stations like Kling's, as well as more typical stations found throughout the nation.

Most of these stations were constructed when gasoline sales were coupled with automotive service. The key features of these "service stations" include one or two banks of gasoline pumps, an office space, and two or more service bays. But since the 1970s, the service aspect has largely fallen away. The advent of pump-your-own gas began the trend toward less service. In most states, this system has now reached the pay-at-the-pump stage in which you can buy gas with a credit card inserted at the pump and never deal with a human being at any time during the transaction. The decline of the service function of the station has received a critical boost with the increased computer technology of automobiles that has rendered them mechanically untouchable by anyone not possessing the sophisticated and expensive equipment and expertise found at a dealer's service department. The simplicity of a 1954 Chevrolet's upright six cylinder engine has been replaced by the complexity of Cadillac's Northstar System that boasts no need for a tune-up the first hundred thousand miles. Not only are owners now virtually prohibited from working on their own cars, but journeyman mechanics who were once fixtures of the service station have a vastly diminished role and produce far less revenue for the company than they once did. This revenue loss has more than been compensated by the linking of gasoline sales with quick-stop food purchases, the particular trend that doomed Kling's very site- and function-specific Atlantic "service" station.

If not demolition, what might the future hold for these recent but redundant buildings? It is quite likely that the best means of preserving mid-20th-century gas stations will involve finding new uses for them outside the automotive products and service realm for which they were created. While Kling's station was ill-suited to Sunoco's plans for it, it may well have survived as a video rental store, or a similarly compatible new use for which the building's distinctive design would have been seen as an asset to be celebrated rather than a deficit to be overcome.

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